

Findings Brief

External Review of the Globalization, Growth and Poverty Program

This findings brief is based on the report “External Review of IDRC’s Globalization, Growth and Poverty Program Initiative by Drs Christopher Scott, Kunal Sen and Yazid Dissou. The full report is available from IDRC’s Evaluation Unit.

The objectives of the Globalization, Growth and Poverty Program (GGP) were to assess the extent to which GGP the Program is meeting its aims and objectives; assess how risks to the achievement of the program objectives were identified and managed; and identify any evolution in objectives. The review evaluated the results of the program and analyzed their influence.

GGP was built from the merger of two former programs (Trade, Employment and Competitiveness –TEC; and Micro Impacts of Macro and Adjustment Policies-MIMAP) that had established the Centre’s reputation in the fields of international economic relations and the study of welfare impacts of macroeconomic policies. At its creation in 2006, GGP took over responsibility for managing more than twenty projects. While many of these projects were aligned with some of GGP’s objectives, this project legacy has affected the ‘goodness-of-fit’ between the program’s portfolio and its objectives during the last three years.

In the period covered by this evaluation (April 2006-July 2009), GGP had two distinctive features. First, GGP carried out a very broad range of research as a program encompassing seven thematic areas (agrifood markets; competition policy; fiscal policy and accountability; labour markets and migration; private sector development; social protection; and trade, investment and economic integration). Second, starting in FY 2007/2008 and partly as a result of co-funding by CIDA, one project in GGP’s portfolio - the Poverty and Economic Policy (PEP) network - received a larger budget allocation than any other.

1. Program Aims

The GGP Program Initiative was established in April 2006 with four objectives:

1. To provide solid, locally grounded evidence on the patterns and drivers of inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction, in order to enable governments and non-government actors in developing countries to design suitable policies and programs.
2. To inform policy-makers and civil society actors of the opportunities and challenges to reduce inequality and poverty through appropriate trade strategies and by situating markets (domestically and internationally) within proper contexts of rules and regulations.
3. To develop policy analyses, proposals and recommendations which enable governments and non-government actors in developing countries to design equitable and effective social protection systems
4. To enrich policy analyses conducted by researchers in developing countries with enhanced understanding of dynamics and non-income dimensions of poverty and inequality, the political economic implications of effecting pro-equity reforms, and the appropriate levels (local, national, international) of pro-equity policy interventions.

2. Review Methodology

The review team undertook a mixed method review, including desk reviews of documents, face-to-face/skype interviews of informants and site visits to nine countries. Quantitative data were analyzed from several sources, including a bibliometric review, monitoring traffic on the three Social and Economic Policy (SEP) Program Area websites, and an on-line survey of visitors to the GGP website.

The collection of information was guided by a set of linked matrices which mapped GGP objectives and expected GGP outputs into a set of questions and associated indicators. A sample of 17 projects was purposively selected for detailed review. Most of these were mature projects chosen to provide the review team with information rich case-studies on all the important dimensions of project evaluation: significance of results, effectiveness in disseminating research findings, progress in capacity building and success in influencing policy. A further four projects were briefly examined during site visits.

One innovative methodological contribution of this review was the elaboration of an integrated framework to analyze the internet reach of a Program Initiative. The fact that IDRC is on a steep learning curve with respect to e-monitoring, together with other difficulties arising from the complexity of using web analytics, has limited the application of this framework in this external review. Nevertheless, valuable experience was gained from this pilot exercise.

3. Review Findings

A review of all project abstracts and Project Approval Documents indicated that GGP projects have generally been well designed to meet the program's objectives. GGP has made progress towards achieving all four of its program objectives. The work on labour markets is particularly valuable for attaining the first objective (on the patterns and drivers of inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction), since increasing employment and/or real wages are the main transmission mechanisms for converting faster economic growth into poverty reduction. As regards the second objective (challenges to reducing inequality and poverty through appropriate trade strategies and markets), GGP has sought to integrate two strands of research previously funded by IDRC: international trade and domestic/regional responses to globalization, and the effects of adjustment and structural reform on the poor. IDRC has a strong international reputation for its competition research and GGP has funded several innovative projects in this area.

Progress towards the third objective on social protection has been mostly concerned with broadening and deepening the concept of human well-being adopted by policy makers. This includes attempts to operationalize Sen's framework, as well as other work focused on multidimensional poverty. This research also constitutes an advance towards the fourth objective (dynamics and non-income dimensions of poverty and inequality and the political economic implications of effecting pro-equity reforms), as an increasing number of GGP projects make reference to non-income dimensions of poverty and make use of panel data to study income dynamics.

The importance of political economy considerations is acknowledged in several trade projects where there is more emphasis by GGP on understanding the policy process than in previous IDRC programs in this area. As regards the subsidiarity issue, the Mercosur Economic Research Network (MERCONET) examines the role of Latin American regional integration in a globalised world. However, with the significant exception of work by the Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS) in PEP, there is not much evidence of research at the sub-national level in the sample projects. This is the case even where the research questions warranted such a disaggregated analysis.

3.1 Niche

While the breadth of research activities funded by GGP has made it difficult for the program to occupy a distinctive intellectual niche in the development economics research landscape, it certainly fills a distinctive institutional niche. Few, if any, Northern donors have a mandate to fund rigorous economic research on the South, in the South and primarily for the South.

3.2 Multi-country projects

GGP funds research through several modalities, of which multi-country projects are by far the most important. Multi-country networks, which tend to be regionally based, have generally functioned well with significant individual and organizational capacity building, and in some cases, effective policy influencing.

The experience of time-bound multi-country projects has been more mixed. Some have succeeded in developing a common methodology and overcoming the problems of applying it to data sets drawn from different countries. Others have found this challenge too great and have operated as a set of single country projects that were largely self-contained. This funding modality has costs as well as benefits for the organizations and individuals involved. No doubt the intention is to pull up weaker institutions and researchers by partnering them with stronger ones. However, obliging stronger Southern organizations to adopt a research design which ‘taxes’ them (via payments in researchers’ time, in institutional resources and in higher research transactions costs) in an attempt to pull up weaker organizations, introduces a disincentive for the former group.

3.3 Risk Management

GGP management faced a particular set of risks which arose from implementing a global research program with defined thematic priorities in heterogeneous regions. These potential risks have been addressed very effectively by (i) conducting extended dialogues with high-risk applicants before a proposal is approved; (ii) using Research Support Projects (RSPs) as venture capital projects; (iii) having recourse to informal peer reviews; (iv) making ongoing investments in proven partner organisations; (v) providing mentoring in selected projects, and (vi) monitoring research quality periodically via site visits, rolling Project Completion Reports (rPCRs) and trip reports.

One type of risk which is difficult to identify *ex ante*, but which can have serious consequences *ex post*, is the unexpected departure of key staff in partner organizations before a project has been completed. This might be addressed by requiring all project proposals to include a contingency plan which would describe what measures would be put in place to ensure continuity of the project in the event of key researchers leaving before the project was completed. Such an exercise would force project leaders to think through in advance the full implications of their departure and to remind them of their responsibilities. Having a plan in place at the start of a project should provide some assurance that, were such a contingency to arise, any disruption would be minimized.

3.4 Outputs

The review team's assessment of GGP's research findings was limited by the lack of final research outputs for several projects either because they were still ongoing, or because of the lags in publication that typically accompany most research outputs. Nevertheless, it considers that the quality of research is uneven across themes and regions. There is evidence of very good quality work in some projects, while in others the findings are unclear or overly descriptive, which reflects poor research design and weak project implementation.

3.5 Capacity Building

As regards capacity building, GGP has assisted individuals acquire research skills in several ways. The funding of training courses, workshops, study visits and mentoring by Northern professionals have all been valuable. It is also clear that much research in GGP's portfolio would not have been done at all in the absence of IDRC support. This implies that much 'learning-by-doing' among Southern researchers would have been lost without GGP.

The experience with research institution building is more complex. In some regions, there is little firm evidence that GGP has built the capacity of research institutions, such as universities and research think-tanks, particularly in their ability to deliver high quality policy-oriented research. In contrast, there is clear evidence of organizational capacity building in the networks that GGP has supported, such as MERCONET and the Latin American Trade Network (LATN). Overall, GGP has demonstrated a willingness to embrace research partners that are either new to the program or to IDRC.

3.6 Communicating research and policy influence

Measuring the impact of research on policy is notoriously difficult, but there is evidence that GGP has succeeded on several occasions in expanding policy capacities, broadening policy horizons and affecting policy regimes. Notwithstanding these successes, there are several aspects of the research-to-policy interface that remain problematic. Although GGP has made strenuous efforts to communicate the results of its research, it needs to be more proactive with respect to bridging the research community it supports and the policy community it aims to reach.

Monitoring and evaluating research impact on policy has not been consistently undertaken across projects, while potential research users have not always become involved at an early stage of a project's life-cycle. The results of the review team's website monitoring exercise and website survey should provide the program with useful feedback regarding how opportunities for disseminating and discussing research findings over the internet (including e-mail, website downloads and e-bulletin boards) could be used to best effect. GGP could also experiment with new mechanisms of communicating research, such as the electronic media (including films, videos and e-policy briefs), and move beyond end-of-project workshops as the standard mechanism for disseminating research findings. Building on the success of the Research to Policy (R2P) RSP, it should strengthen the capacity of research organizations and individual researchers to engage in effective communication of their research.

4. Issues for Consideration

4.1 Program focus and knowledge spillovers

As pre-GGP projects reach completion, so opportunities arise to give the program a stronger sense of strategic direction. IDRC is a relatively small player in a very large global research industry, so GGP's funding of economic and social research is likely to have greater impact if it is not widely and thinly spread. As noted in the review, GGP management should give consideration to merging MERCONET with LATN to form a single Latin American trade network.

The program might prioritize work on labour markets (to which some social protection research could be more closely associated) and link trade and competition research more closely. Management should also be alert to the generation of knowledge spill-overs between projects which can be internalized within GGP by ensuring information feedback into the design of future research. Examples of such spillovers are identified in the review.

4.2 Multi-country projects

The promotion of multi-country collaborative research suggests that IDRC has an implicit model of research capacity building between stronger and weaker Southern partners. GGP should re-consider the principles behind the construction of time-bound multi-country projects. Given the fragility of some stronger Southern institutions, there is a risk that imposing a multi-country framework may drag them down, ie. reduce the quality of research they might have produced on their own, by more than their weaker partners are pulled up.

Innovative research may be developed and disseminated as effectively by undertaking it well in a single country at first, after which it can be scaled up and applied elsewhere. Furthermore, there are increasing opportunities to carry out rigorous, comparative empirical research within countries using sub-national data. Once this is done, it should be easier to assess the relative merits of this model compared with alternatives, such as funding single country projects followed by replication elsewhere if the initial research proves successful.

4.3 Capacity building

GGP's current openness should be maintained in order to extend the success of earlier IDRC programs in building capacity among new beneficiary organisations, especially those that have not yet received significant support from donors, but which show great promise. New research partners may be more open to new ideas, thereby offering more opportunities for GGP to influence their research agendas in line with program objectives. There may also be greater scope for GGP to bring about effective organisational capacity building in these less established research institutions.

4.5 Research competitions

GGP management should consider extending the use of competitive, open-call, responsive mode funding mechanisms in non-network research projects. Greater reliance on this procedure for selecting projects could increase the pool of researchers that are engaged in GGP research, ensure transparency in the allocation of research funds, allow the research agenda to be more demand driven, and bring in new research ideas and innovative methodologies.

4.6 Sub-national analysis of growth and poverty

GGP should encourage projects that examine the drivers of growth and poverty across sub-national entities, such as provinces or districts, especially in geographically large countries, such as India and China. The literature shows there is significant within-country variation in Asia and Latin America which has generated considerable policy interest, particularly where substantive decentralization of the public sector has occurred. The availability of data-sets at regional and sub-regional level allows for the analysis of GGP themes using a more spatially disaggregated approach. The review team believes that such sub-national analysis may allow GGP to avoid some of the methodological challenges it has faced in several of the multi-country projects.

4.7 Communication of Research Results

Research Impact Plans should be standard elements of research funding applications and should be assessed as an integral part of all proposals. These plans should (i) identify the beneficiaries of the research; (ii) assess the potential impact of their research on policy and practice, and (iii) outline the engagement, communications and research uptake activities to be undertaken by the researchers. Communications should be properly resourced in research budgets. IDRC might consider earmarking a certain percentage of total project resources for communication activities, a practice which is now being contemplated or adopted by other research donors.

4.8 Engagement in Africa

Given the prevalence of poverty in rural areas, GGP should devote more resources to studying rural poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa. Additional research is needed to understand better how agriculture and rural non-farm employment can contribute to reducing poverty in the region. As a first step, GGP management might explore the possibility of collaboration with other IDRC programs that focus on poverty in Sub-Saharan African countries.

Support for research capacity building in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) should be prioritized. The region needs more assistance in this area than other regions, while capacity building takes time and only yields a pay-off in the long-term. Therefore, it is a good investment to expand the opportunities for researchers in SSA to interact with more experienced academics.

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